

The Politics of Information Systems

Lessons for the Budget Information System

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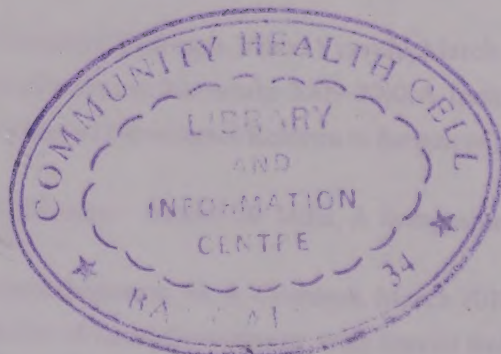
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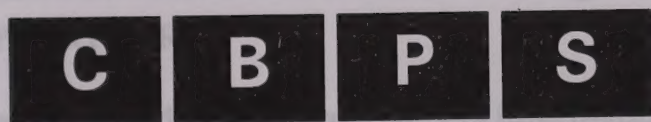
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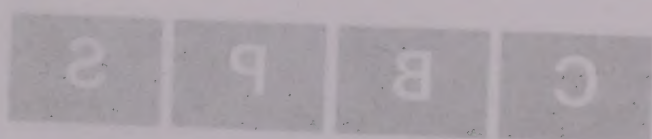
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M.S. Ramprasad
Secretary

Foreword

There is often a belief that technology can solve social problems. New technologies make for greater efficiency, for cheaper products and so on. In Bangalore the appropriate technology movement, sometimes suffered from this: for example, the belief that a good design of a cooking stove would lead to better living conditions for women. Experience has shown that social factors have a way of creeping in. Technological innovation then does not yield the promised dividends. For a technology to succeed, it is essential that the social and other conditions be right.

When CBPS decided to work on a Budget Information System, in the belief that better quality budget data would lead to better governance at the local level in India, many of us felt that we must guard against any implicit determinism. Thus, we requested Janaki Srinivasan, a researcher in this field, to examine two projects where information was made available to the community, to see if there lessons for CBPS, which would help us make less mistakes.

Janaki has studied the MKSS in Rajasthan and IVRP in Tamil Nadu intensively and suggests that to help make information accessible to various stakeholders, different modes of communication and use of multiple media would be necessary. The general assumption that the availability of information ensures accessibility and its utility, Janaki stresses, is not correct as information does not operate in a vacuum but within a specific social and political context. This paper is the result of this investigation.

We hope this paper will be useful to those interested in this subject, and lead to a useful debate around the CBPS effort.

M.S. Ramaprasad
Secretary

Abstract

The efficacy of any technology-enabled information system for improving state-citizen relations rests on two assumptions. First, that making government information available in the public domain ensures its accessibility to all sections of the community and second that where accessible, such information possesses some utility for those who access it. But, since information systems do not operate in a vacuum, and have to work within a specific social and political context, it is critical that their accessibility and utility be empirically examined rather than assumed. I study government information systems in two rural Indian communities – one in the state of Rajasthan and the other in the Union Territory of Puducherry – in order to understand the social and political factors that shape the accessibility and utility of such information systems. My research suggests that the use of multiple media, and different modes of communication might help make information accessible to a wider range of people. However, it is ultimately political action that is critical in making information useful to a community. In this report, I explore the implications of this research for the design of the Centre for Budget Policy Studies' Budget Information System and Portal.

INTRODUCTION

Information empowers and information frees people at all levels of society, regardless of their gender, their level of education or their status, to make rational decisions and to improve the quality of their lives

Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Africa¹

I situate my study of government information systems against the backdrop of claims such as this one that have been popular since the 1990s. My research questions the universalistic notion that “information empowers.” It challenges the implicit assumption behind many such claims: that making information available in the public domain ensures its accessibility to all sections of a community and that, where accessible, such information possesses some utility for those who can access it. I argue, instead, that information is socially embedded, and that its accessibility and utility in the context of state-citizen relations needs to be understood within this framework. Based on a study of two initiatives in India that see information as crucial to their work on remaking state-citizen relations, I suggest that not only is information socially embedded, but publicly available government information needs to be re-embedded in a specific social and political context before it is accessible and useful for a community. Moreover, my research suggests that the process of re-embedding is seldom possible without political action. Finally, I discuss the implications of my research for the design and use of the Centre for Budget Policy Studies (CBPS)’s Budget Information System and Portal that seek to make government budget information publicly available through an online internet-based platform.

¹ Mr. K.Y. Amoako at an information technology coordinating meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, October 1996. Quote available at <http://www.un.org/ecosocdev/geninfo/afrec/1997/init3.htm>

BACKGROUND TO CBPS AND THE BUDGET INFORMATION SYSTEM PROJECT

CBPS was set up with a vision to improve the budgetary processes in public expenditure with a particular focus on decentralisation processes introduced in the country which aims towards a better governance structure of the state.² CBPS has undertaken research and analysis of budgets of the state in India since its inception in 1998. Much of its work has been concerned with the dynamics between different levels of the local elected government, their roles in processes of decision making and their dynamics with administrators. CBPS collects and analyses budget records of local self-governments such as *gram panchayats* and municipalities. It has used a variety of means including publications, workshops, and films to take its research and insights to elected representatives, functionaries, and citizens, with the objective of contributing to the public debate, on decentralized planning and budgets.

The focus of this paper will be on CBPS's ongoing Budget Information System (BIS) project that seeks to collect, analyse and report on budget data from local governments. CBPS is supported in this project by a multi-year grant from google.org under the 'Inform and empower' category.³ The objective of the grant, according to google-org, is "to create a budget information service for local governments in India, with the goal of facilitating better district and municipal-level planning." The BIS project is currently underway in two districts in Karnataka and Kerala. The project involves digitising budget information collected from these locations in a uniform format, analysing it and making it available through workshops. CBPS

² Information on the CBPS is from the CBPS website unless otherwise mentioned

³ <http://www.google.org/investments.html>

simultaneously wishes to extend the BIS to create a **Budget Information Portal (BIP)**, “an online internet-based platform which brings together identified stakeholder groups to enable them to constructively engage in meaningful exchange of information in the process creating a knowledge bank in the area of budgets & budgetary processes”

A CBPS presentation on the BIS project says that “Budget Based Initiatives are critically dependent on data, information, and knowledge” (CBPS 2009). All budget information is legally available to every citizen; local elected representatives are also mandated to discuss this information with citizens prior to making decisions. But does the availability of information by law or through the introduction of technologies translate to information being accessible or useful for people? In fact, budget information remains exceedingly difficult to access or use for individuals and even for institutes that work with budgets.

- Gender, caste, class and literacy continue to determine who is able to easily access government information (IIITB 2005).
- As technical documents, budgets are even more time-consuming to parse than other categories of government information. The many groups interested in budget information, including local elected representatives, bureaucrats, civil society groups, researchers and citizens, are not likely to be equally (or at all) familiar with the terminology and heads of account used in a budget.
- Even beyond the terminology, local government budgets can be complicated because of their varied sources of revenue and the range of rules governing what each may be used for.⁴

⁴ For example, the separation between urban and rural regions can complicate budgets as may the allocation from different government departments to a particular sector such as health.

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- The lack of a standard format and quality of maintaining budget information in practice is also a deterrent in comparative analyses across regions. While there exists a prescribed format for maintaining budget information, a variety of factors including regional histories and the lack of administrative capacity at the different tiers of the panchayat, have ensured that records continue to be maintained in widely different formats across the country.
 - Coupled with the perception that government money is not really one's own, reading through and analysing a budget document is a task that people are often not motivated enough to do.

As CBPS attempts to leverage the BIS and BIP to facilitate local governments in planning, several questions arise. The first among these is regarding the requirements for making budget records available through a BIP. Next, even when budget records have been made available on the BIP, what obstacles may different communities face in accessing these records? Finally, what would motivate different stakeholders to use budget records even if they are able to access them? What are ways in which they can leverage these records to make them useful in the process of planning and beyond? CBPS's past work with budgets provides answers to some of these questions. In this paper, I attempt to address some of these issues using the lens of two initiatives whose working has focussed on making government information available to citizens. What do their experiences tell us about government information in general and about how government information is used (or not) in state-citizen relations? As budget analysis increasingly emerges as key to holding the state to account (IBP 2010), I ask how understanding the socially embedded nature of information might help make budget information accessible and useful to communities.

INFORMATION AS SOCIALLY EMBEDDED

While economics has largely treated information as an economic input in decision-making processes, other information theorists argue that the economic value of information derives not from some immanent, eternal quality it possesses, but from its embedding in contingent, historically specific social relations (Jessop 2007; Robins and Webster 1987; Schiller 1988). To treat information as having intrinsic value dis-embeds it from these relations, and obscures its value and meaning. I suggest that information systems too derive their value only from the social relations and the political context in which they are produced, valued, and used.

In order to operationalise a socially embedded understanding of information systems, I suggest that the availability, accessibility, and utility of information systems need to be recognized as distinct and examined separately. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines “available” as “present or ready for immediate use;” “accessible” as “capable of being reached” or “.. of being understood or appreciated;” and “useful” as “serviceable for an end or purpose.” While availability, accessibility and utility are interconnected, they do not naturally follow from one other. Let us look at the case of government information systems in this regard. The term “government information” as used in everyday interactions typically spans a range of details, records, and documents, including details of government procedures and schemes, records of decision-making within different tiers of the government, records of the government’s revenue and expenditure under different heads of accounts spread across different welfare schemes, and government documents issued to individual citizens. In terms of form as well, “government information” takes many physical forms. The legally mandated public availability of this government information is no doubt an important first step in shaping state-citizen relations. However, it is important to

remember that the accessibility or even the visibility of such information to different sections of a community is restricted by social, cultural, economic, and political factors that include language, caste, literacy, class, and the medium used to make information visible. The utility of accessible information faces even bigger challenges. How do people see this information as tied to their own lives? What incentives do they have to make use of it even when they are able to access it? What struggles do they anticipate in making use of it, based on their own past experiences as well as on the nature of the information in question? It is the answers to these questions, all of which draw on the social and political context in which information systems work, that decide the utility of information for a specific community and for state-citizen relations in a region.

A socially embedded understanding of information systems thus has two implications for government information systems. First, it suggests that the demand or requirement for specific kinds of government information in a community will be shaped by the nature of state-citizen interactions in that community. Second, a socially embedded understanding of information systems suggests that government information will need to be explicitly re-embedded in the social and political context of that community to make it accessible and useful to the community.

My research studies the working of information systems in two rural Indian communities—one in Puducherry⁵ and the other in Rajsamand district, Rajasthan—to understand the social and political factors that shape the accessibility and utility of government information systems. I look at initiatives in these two regions that have kept information at the centre of their efforts to improve state-citizen relations, but have done so with very

⁵ The union territory and city of Puducherry were renamed thus from the earlier 'Pondicherry' in 2006.

different understandings of the social embedding of information in the regions where they operate. One of these is a campaign led by a political movement demanding a citizen's right to examine government information, and the other an NGO-led research project that provided government information using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). I study the process by which the two initiatives determined the need for particular kinds of government information in a community. I also study the different ways in which these initiatives then tried to make government information systems accessible and useful to a community by re-embedding government information in the context of state-citizen interactions in that region.

My research suggests that above and beyond the mere availability of information, gender, caste, and language, as well as the media and modes of communication used to make these information systems available, were matters of concern in making government information accessible to different sections of a community. Moreover, these information systems are seldom found useful in the absence of political action. The structural and ideological differences between the initiatives shaped how they went about re-embedding information and making it useful. In particular, the nature of interaction between the initiative I study and the different tiers of the government played a crucial part in what government information systems could 'do' to change state-citizen relations in each case.

The rest of the report is organised as follows to cover the aspects mentioned above. In the next section "Theoretical and empirical background," I examine the rise of the idea that information is important to state-citizen relations, especially in the context of decentralisation in India. In the section titled "Research cases and methods," I describe the two initiatives that I studied and my research findings. Finally, I summarise my findings and examine their implications for CBPS' BIS and BIP in the "Conclusions" section.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I lay out in detail the reasons why the availability of information is seen as crucially linked to ideas of improving state-citizen relations. Following this, I describe decentralisation in the Indian context, examining its structure, the challenges it faces and the role of information in the process. Given my contention that information is socially embedded, understanding the landscape of state-citizen interactions within which the information systems of my study operate is important in order to understand the accessibility and utility of government information. In addition, this background helps understand better the stance that the two initiatives in my study adopt towards information and towards the role of the local level of the decentralised state in their regions of operation.

Information and state-citizen relations: Why now?

Information has become an integral part of discourse on state-citizen relations especially since the 1990s. There are several reasons for this, and they include arguments on both the 'information' front and the 'state-citizen' front. On the information front, the idea of 'information' as a critical input in transactions derives significantly from information economics in the 1960s and 1970s. While information had always been important for economists, it had so far been treated primarily as a background assumption (conditions of 'perfect information'). It was with the rise of information economics in the 1960s and 1970s that 'information' started to be seen as an input of economic value in transactions. Moreover, research was concerned with transactions in markets as well as between the state and citizens, though the rationale suggesting the economic value of information as an input was different in the two realms.⁶

⁶ For the importance of information in market transactions, especially the link between the availability of information and economic development, see Grace et al (2003), Menou (1995); McConnell (1995); Lamberton (1973); Romer (1986); and Stiglitz (2002)

In the realm of state-citizen relations, prevalent arguments against centralisation and in favour of decentralisation,⁷ saw the availability of information as closely linked to the goals of democracy, efficiency, and accountability that decentralisation espoused.⁸ Moreover, the availability of information was seen simultaneously as a necessity for an effective decentralised state as well as a consequence of it. The overarching arguments in favour of making information available in the context of a decentralised state suggested two categories of benefits. The first had to do with an informed state, while the second was concerned with an informed citizenry. The rationale was that if the lowest tier of a decentralised state had enough information about a community, it could make better decisions regarding the allocation of resources to that community. On the other hand, the availability of information would enable the creation of an informed citizenry that could actively and productively participate in processes of decision-making by the local-level state, as well as monitor its working. The inherent tension in the process, of course, was that to get information, citizens depended on the very entity whose activities they sought to effectively monitor by using that information: the state.

While arguments abound on why the availability of information would support the goals of decentralisation or how decentralisation simplifies the process of making information available, a variety of social and political factors mediate the relationship between decentralisation and information in a particular social setting, making it impossible to take the other two dimensions of information provision - accessibility and utility - for granted. In the next

⁷ For more on the goals of decentralisation and the role of information in the process, refer to Appendix 1.

⁸ The rationale for centralisation, which was that centralisation is necessary for efficient administration of information, was becoming unacceptable by this time. In fact, one of the arguments advanced *against* information gathering was precisely that it was dangerous since it could lead to centralisation and surveillance under certain conditions. - (Scott 1998)

section, I explore the practical challenges to the theoretical promise of decentralisation and to the provision of information in India.

Meanwhile, even as the theoretical arguments on the importance of information to market and state-citizen transactions were being consolidated, new technological developments and the falling costs of ICTs further accelerated attempts to make information available both for market transactions and in the realm of state-citizen relations. ICTs in the 1990s held the promise of making information available to a larger number of people. ICTs promised faster, more transparent, and efficient transactions. It was for all these reasons that states, international funding agencies and civil society formations invested heavily in the project of digitising government information or using ICTs in other ways to create government information systems that could make information available to the citizenry.

Decentralisation and information in India

The 73rd Amendment to the Indian constitution passed in 1992 gives village, block and district level bodies a constitutional status under Indian law. The important provisions of the amendment include:

- a) The establishment of a three-tier Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) structure, with elected bodies at the village, block and district levels
- b) The constitution of a *gram sabha* - a panchayat-level deliberative body that consists of all the adults in a panchayat
- c) Direct elections to five-year terms for panchayat members at all levels
- d) Reservation of one third seats to women at all panchayat levels including as Chairs of the different tiers; reservation of seats for the councils as well as the chairs of the different tiers. for members of the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities based on their population

e) A State Election Commission (SEC) to supervise, organise, and oversee panchayat elections at all levels

f) A State Finance Commission (SFC) to review and revise the financial position of the panchayats at five-year intervals, and to make recommendations to the state government about the distribution of panchayat funds.

Implicit in these provisions is the idea of an informed citizenry that is willing and equipped to participate in processes of decision-making. The informed state, in turn, is supposed to make an effort to understand the needs of the community and plans its work based on such insights. Since an important concern in the process of planning democratically is the prioritisation of needs and the allocation of resources to different needs, government information on budgets and expenditure becomes pivotal to the processes of participatory planning and the monitoring of government resources.

In practice, the working of decentralization in India is far from the ideals espoused above. Johnson and others point to

..an apparent tension between the very formal process of decentralisation – in which the State (writ large) lays out the legal terms and conditions under which power will be allocated within its boundaries – and the very informal (or messy) process of political economy, in which power – rooted in class, caste and gender – determines the informal functioning of local political institutions.

Johnson (2003): 2

These observers also point to three elements in particular that are understood to have undermined the power and autonomy of village-level panchayats in India: India's federalism, the 'resistant' bureaucracy and 'élite capture'

(Johnson 2003). The first among these, 'federalism,' recognises that the 73rd amendment continues to provide considerable authority and latitude to the state government in deciding the nature and scale of local government, especially its fiscal autonomy. The second factor – a resistant bureaucracy – refers to the tension between the local elected government and the local, non-elected bureaucracy, who may perceive decentralisation as a threat to their position and authority. Finally, the third concern is that the opportunities offered by local governments are captured by the elite within communities. It is within these constraints that the PRI in India works.

We should put in some of our own references here!

What are the implications of these concerns for making information available and, later, in how it is used? Decentralisation shapes the political context in which government information is embedded. The most significant implication of these concerns, therefore, is that making government information available, accessible or useful for people is heavily structured by the power relations between the central, state, and local governments, between elected representatives and bureaucrats, and within the community. It is only by negotiating these relations that information gains value for different people and to that extent, supports the goals of decentralization. Negotiating these relations, however, is no easy matter.

RESEARCH CASES AND METHODS

The two initiatives I study see information as a key element in state-citizen interactions. I used a combination of participant observation, interviews, and archival analysis in my research and I describe these methods in more detail under my discussion of each case. The first case I studied was the work of a Rajasthan-based 'non-party, people's political movement' Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) on the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) law, which provides citizens the right to examine government information. The second initiative I studied was the Information Village Research Project (IVRP) in Puducherry that was conceptualised and implemented by the M.S.Swaminathan Research Foundation (henceforth referred to as the 'Swaminathan Foundation'). This project sought to provide government information through 'village knowledge centres' that were equipped with computers and an internet connection.

The MKSS and the Swaminathan Foundation are structurally and ideologically very different. While both see the welfare state as central to their work, MKSS adopts a rights-based discourse in its work which leads it to confront the policies of the state. In contrast, the Swaminathan Foundation works within the framework of the state and current state policies. Each has its own way of interacting with different tiers of the government. Moreover, the geographical regions where the MKSS and the Swaminathan Foundation work too are far apart, culturally dissimilar and possess different histories. What then is to be gained from studying the initiatives of two such different groups alongside each other?

The reason I focus on these two initiatives is that in spite of being so wide apart in every way, both MKSS and the Swaminathan Foundation nevertheless find merit in the claim that information is empowering. How

do they then interpret 'information' in their initiatives and what do they see as its role in their work? At the same time, what do they see as their role in mediating state-citizen interactions using information as a tool? Further, how does their particular thinking about state-citizen relations shape how government information is made available, accessible, and useful to a community? I examine these questions in the following two sections that discuss the working of each group at length.

Mazdoor Kisaan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS)

In this section, I discuss how MKSS understands state-citizen relations, what constitutes information in its work and what it sees as the role of information in changing state-citizen relations, now in the context of decentralization. How have these factors shaped what information is available, accessible, and useful to the community that MKSS works with?

For the MKSS

democracy is not merely the vote...all state power emanates from the people. The people are therefore entitled to control the why, the where, and the what of governance.

MKSS website (n.d.)

As opposed to fighting the state, working to overthrow it, or outsourcing it. MKSS sees value in laying claim to

a share of governance by theoretically owning the state, linking livelihood questions to the democratic decision-making process and demanding a responsible and accountable state.

Moreover, while

Every government that assumes office with the peoples' mandate to govern for general welfare of its people has to both deliver and be answerable, the demand for accountability equally imposes on the people the duty to oversee and monitor the functioning of the government.

Roy and Dey (n.d.)

It is against the backdrop of these ideas about the state and the nature of the state's relationship with citizens that MKSS's work on the Right to Information (RTI) campaign has to be understood. The RTI campaign that the MKSS led with several other groups for a decade or more (between the mid-1990s and the passage of the central RTI Act in 2005) was premised on the belief that the government is responsible for the general welfare of people, and that it needs to be accountable on this count to citizens. Further, since it was the duty of citizens to oversee and monitor the functioning of the government, citizens should have the information required to do so.

The MKSS also believed that change was possible only through ongoing political action and not through project-based work. The MKSS's work started prior to the 73rd amendment and its earlier work was focussed mainly on the state government. At the village level, MKSS's work happened in the context of the traditional panchayat. Since the setting up of the PRI, however, MKSS has worked with them to achieve certain objectives, but has bypassed them in other cases. These interactions and choices will become clearer in the course of the next few sections.

MKSS's work did not begin with an information focus: rather, the RTI campaign arose from an understanding of how government information fit into people's concerns of livelihood in the region. Its work with the RTI

campaign was focused specifically on government documents related to the utilization of government funds. Its current work on the implementation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and Scheme (NREGS) also focuses on government documents related to the allocation and utilization of government funds on the scheme.⁹ Since the MKSS's work in the RTI campaign is well documented, I only discuss key points from the campaign (Bakshi 1998; Jenkins and Goetz 1999; Mishra 2003). For the purposes of this report, I focus instead on MKSS's current work, especially its involvement with *jan sunwais* (public hearings) and work on records related to the employment guarantee scheme. Before that, I describe the methods that I employed in doing my research.

I spent about five months with the MKSS in 2009. In this time, I lived and travelled with MKSS members or supporters. I attended several public meetings that involved MKSS as an organiser or participant. These included social audit trainings in Baran district in eastern Rajasthan; an NREGA fair at the Vijayapura panchayat in Rajsamand district, Rajasthan; and a south-zone RTI meeting in Hyderabad. I participated in and attended a *jan sunwai* in Chileshtar village in Bhilwara district, Rajasthan. I also discussed the NREGS Management Information System (MIS) with National Informatics Centre (NIC) personnel and helped install an NREGA software tool in Vijayapura panchayat.

Participation in a range of activities helped me understand the different areas of RTI and NREGA implementation that the MKSS works on. Even more than the formal meetings, however, it was interviews and conversations with MKSS members and others participants in the earliest

⁹ The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) aims at enhancing the livelihood security of people in rural areas by guaranteeing hundred days of wage-employment in a financial year to a rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work (<http://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>)

jan sunwais that helped me understand the MKSS ideology, the structure of its work, and its connections with other civil society groups and different tiers of the state.

I also spoke to bureaucrats and elected representatives, including both MKSS supporters and those who have been in conflict with the MKSS, in order to locate the working of the MKSS within the larger political economy of the region. The RTI archives at the Nehru Memorial Centre in Delhi also helped me understand the evolution of the RTI campaign over 15+ years.

Availability, accessibility and utility in the RTI campaign

Founded in 1990 in rural Rajasthan, MKSS is a union of workers and farmers. In its work in the late 1980s and early 1990s, MKSS workers discovered that people employed on public works were being paid less than the minimum wages allowed by law. Further, workers were not allowed to examine ‘muster rolls’ – the documents that contained details of those who had worked on a specific worksite, measurements of the work done and the payments received by workers along with their signatures or thumbprints. MKSS’s minimum wage campaigns led it to realize the significance of government records in people’s everyday lives. Moreover, examining the few government records that MKSS was able to gain access to indicated that there was much discrepancy between what records claimed and people’s accounts of what had happened. This was also the origin of the MKSS’s RTI campaign, which it led with many other individuals and citizen groups through the 1990s. The national RTI act was finally enacted in 2005 and gave citizens the right to examine government information, including government documents in many formats.

During the RTI campaign, whenever the MKSS was able to procure

government information, mainly in the form of documents, it tried to make the documents accessible using a variety of media and modes. It used songs, plays, poetry, theatre, and puppets, besides the more customary pamphlets and banners, to gather people and bring them to 'public hearings' where records were publicly read out and contested in front of a panel that also included bureaucrats. MKSS members also actively sought out people's attention by taking paper records door to door and reading them out to groups of people in order to cross-verify what the records said with conditions on the ground. Thus, MKSS undertook concerted action in order to make the available information accessible.

What of the utility of the documents? First, MKSS's RTI campaign rose out of a felt need for access to government documents in the minimum wage campaigns in Rajasthan. The meaning, value and utility of government information were, therefore, socially embedded and was what spurred the campaign on in the first place. The legal availability of government documents, thus, came after their utility was established. Second, the process of public hearings or jan sunwais further socially re-embedded abstract information from government records in a regional context, opposing the information on official records to oral narratives of village residents and their version of what actually happened. Both these processes of understanding information as socially embedded were important steps in making information useful during the course of the RTI campaign.

MKSS's current work

MKSS's current work is largely focused on supporting the implementation of the NREGS, especially the utilisation of funds under this scheme. Its current work that I discuss here may be categorised thus: organising jan sunwais on public works done under any government scheme including the

NREGS and supporting social audits on NREGS works¹⁰ (e.g. Chileshtar jan sunwai in March 2009 and Bhilwara social audit in October 2009, both in Bhilwara district in Rajasthan); creating a model panchayat where all panchayat records are open to the village community (Vijayapura panchayat in Rajsamand district, Rajasthan) and working with the NIC to improve the NREGA Management Information System (MIS) available online. A brief description of all three efforts follows.

Jan sunwai

A critical difference between the earliest public hearings or jan sunwais organised by the MKSS in the early 1990s and the jan sunwais being held today is that the former took place at a time when there was no law mandating that government documents be made available to the MKSS or to individual citizens. MKSS had to find a cooperative bureaucrat or employ other means to access documents. Today, most government documents are technically available to citizens. In fact, under Section 4 of the RTI act, the government is supposed to pro-actively share information. Therefore, the process by which the MKSS obtains records has changed over the years and the need for explicitly applying for information has also been reduced, at least in theory. Practically, of course, applying and receiving complete records continues to be a challenge. Moreover, the implementation of pro-active disclosure in rural Rajsamand leaves much to be desired. Also, even with the availability of records, the need to take these records around the panchayat for discussion and verification has not been reduced.

¹⁰ Social audits of works done under the NREGS are mandated by the act. They have also been institutionalised in the state of Andhra Pradesh under a Social Audits cell. In Rajasthan, besides social audits, MKSS has been conducting training sessions on how-to conduct a social audit. Social audits in which the MKSS has been involved in the past have typically been based on many weeks of preparation, including a week of walking through villages in the targeted region discussing records with residents and staying the night in the villages. The walks culminate in an event where discrepancies in records are shared in front of a gathering of village residents and government officials.

The other big change over the years has been an increase in the variety and number of schemes being administered by a single panchayat. The NREGS in particular has led to a many-fold increase in the funds flowing into a panchayat. Because of the large number of workers, materials and number of works undertaken as part of the NREGS, the volume of panchayat-level records has also grown. This has made it difficult to examine all the schemes administered by the panchayat in a single jan sunwai. Jan sunwais now² either take up a single scheme or a sampling of various schemes depending on what works or schemes appear important or are discussed in a panchayat. To understand the process of a jan sunwai, I briefly describe a jan sunwai that was held in Chileshwar village of Bhilwara district, Rajasthan, on March 5, 2009.

The Chileshwar jan sunwai encompassed the whole gamut of schemes implemented in the Chileshwar panchayat since 2005. MKSS had first worked in Chileshwar for a jan sunwai directed at an educational scheme for high school students in 2007. At the time, they had established a relationship with a few village residents who stayed in touch and later worked with the MKSS to hold another jan sunwai in the village, but this time focussed on all development schemes administered by the panchayat. An RTI was filed in 2008 to obtain records of development works from the panchayat. Partial records were provided by the Block Development Officer (BDO) and NREGS offices in February 2009. MKSS workers and supporters worked on these records, to aggregate them, and highlight the level of details that could be verified with people or which people were likely to remember and understand. For example, people were more likely to remember the total amount they earned working on a public worksite and the total number of days they had worked, rather than by the specific fortnights they had worked on that job, which is how attendance was

officially recorded on the muster rolls. NREGS work records were also printed out from the NREGS MIS for verification. These records, however, were incomplete since the MIS only had records until about October 2008 for the Chileshtar panchayat.

MKSS members compiled all the records that they had procured and separated them into files by scheme or worksite. These files were taken to Chileshtar, five days before the jan sunwai. MKSS workers and those from the village who had asked for the jan sunwai divided the files amongst themselves and set out to verify the work details in the files. They went to public areas and to houses. When they read out a muster roll, if a detail was disputed, people would provide names of other people who would know more about that work. The MKSS group would thus move from one area of the village to the next, building up a list of cases of fraud that people could most strongly testify against. While some groups walked around the village, a backend group worked simultaneously to build a schedule for the public hearing and the different cases that could be brought up during its course. Witness names were noted and witnesses were reassured over the next few days that they could say what they believed was the truth without fear.

A day before the jan sunwai, a small group of workers also toured the entire village on foot, singing songs about accountability and corruption, and announcing details of the jan sunwai scheduled for the next day, urging people to attend. Bureaucrats, and local panchayat leaders were also invited to the sunwai. An international contingent of auditors touring India at the time too was invited to attend the event, leading to a heightened deployment of security personnel on the day of the jan sunwai. Finally, on the day of the sunwai, the cases were read out one by one on the microphone, interspersed with songs and speeches. The sarpanch, the BDO, a member of MKSS

and an employee of SWRC Tilonia were part of the panel that was to listen to the cases, weigh the evidence and decide who was speaking the truth. The jan sunwai had an audience of about 800 people, including sarpanches from nearby panchayats. Cases were read out, followed by a request for people to testify and then a defence or refutation by the people involved. As the sunwai progressed, it became evident that the audience consisted of different factions. The sarpanch, the BDO, and the engineers were implicated in many of the misappropriations that people testified about. Those supporting the sarpanch tried to boo witnesses out and as tempers rose, witnesses encountered a threatening atmosphere in which to testify. Possibly as a result of this, many of the witnesses listed on the MKSS's schedule did not come up to the microphone after all. Over the course of the next few days, the jan sunwai was reported in newspapers. MKSS and the village team compiled a list of discrepancies between records and the conditions on the ground, which was sent to district and state-level bureaucrats. Conversations with Chileshtar residents after the jan sunwai indicated that even though the sunwai did not go exactly as planned, matters of misappropriation, corruption, and the quality of works were discussed in front of an audience. While these topics had always been talked about within the walls of the home or a community, they felt that doing so in a public forum brought about a shift in the absolute, unquestionable authority of the sarpanch in the community.

The reason for presenting the process in such detail is to illustrate that comprehending government information, as well as the process of scrutinising it productively, do not follow easily from its availability. In the case of this jan sunwai, multiple means (pamphlets, song, theatre, face-to-face conversations) and modes (active, passive) of communication were required to make government information accessible. Concerted political

action (in convincing people to attend or testify, involving the press and electronic media, as well as in following up on the findings with the higher-level authorities) is required to make it useful.

Janata Information System

In the Vijayapura panchayat of Deogarh block, Rajsamand district, the walls of the panchayat office and yard, are not blank. They are painted with details from the panchayat record books and include the list of approved works for a financial year and the expenditure on it. On another wall in the village, is painted the list of households that have been provided work under the NREGS in the financial year 2008-09. Members of the MKSS see this as a 'Janata Information System' (or a People Information System) (Hindu 2009). While the display of government information (on notice boards, websites or walls) is required by law, the implementation of the law is not widespread or uniform even within Rajasthan, which makes this an interesting instance of a information system that has been actively made visible to citizens.¹¹

The Vijayapura panchayat has been taken up as a 'model' panchayat by the MKSS. The elected sarpanch in 2009 has been a member of the MKSS for more than 15 years now. He won the sarpanch elections in 2005 on a manifesto promising a transparent panchayat. Besides the records on the wall, the panchayat's registers are 'open' for browsing to the community, as are muster rolls that hang from a hook on the panchayat building wall. The idea behind these measures is twofold: first, it makes available details of government expenditure and second, by putting these details out, it hopes that people will point to discrepancies between the details they see on the

¹¹ Vijayapura is described here as one example of a panchayat where government information is painted on panchayat walls it is by no means the only panchayat in the country to do so.

wall and what they have observed on the ground. Since the records contain details of local residents, the hope is that discrepancies will be easily detectable; will potentially start conversations about the discrepancies within the village; and that this, in turn, will deter the fabrication of records.

Many of the painted details are, in theory, already available to a citizen because of the RTI. But putting them out on a wall in a building that most villagers need to visit at regular and frequent intervals ensures a better audience for this information. For the citizens, besides saving time and effort, this also saves the potential harassment involved in asking for procedural details on how to obtain government information (such as how to file an RTI) or for personal records. Although it is unclear at this stage whether this actually leads to further action on the information by citizens, the panchayat walls of Vijayapura offer one more mechanism by which the working of the state is made more visible and accessible to citizens.¹²

NREGA Management Information System

The government of India's NIC has designed and deployed a national NREGS MIS. For a user, it is theoretically possible to drill down to the gram panchayat level and obtain details of the expenditure on material and labour, including labour rolls, bills, and vouchers for material as well as reports on all these aspects of the working of the NREGS. As mentioned earlier, the MKSS has used records from the MIS in its most recent public hearings. Obtaining reports from the MIS has two advantages for a group

¹² The Vijayapura panchayat also has a panchayat gyan kendra (or Panchayat Knowledge Centre) supported by the National Knowledge Commission for 2009-10 and the Vijayapura panchayat. One of the things that the centre focusses on is participatory planning. It discusses plans for the allocation of panchayat funds (NREGS works are supposed to be planned annually by the gram sabha, but this does not always happen on the ground). The centre also conducts trainings for NREGS mates and other livelihood-related training, explores technologies and methods for worksite management, and hopes to digitise panchayat records at the panchayat level. The idea is to make the employment guarantee a "people's law" in its implementation.

such as the MKSS: it is quicker and easier to print out details from the MIS than to obtain records by filing an RTI application with the panchayat; second, since the MIS makes reports available, it saves MKSS members the labor of consolidating multiple documents and calculating aggregate figures. In practice, however, the MIS poses many problems. While technically, information on the website is available to all, there are many more steps to making it accessible and useful for the citizens and state who these records concern.

Before I get to these, however, we would need to understand a little more the organisation of the MIS content and its problems. The MIS consists of four interlinked categories of data for every gram panchayat: job-card related (a list of people associated with a job card, their relationship to the head of the family, address); work-related (type of work such as water body related/ laying a road/ irrigation related; date it was sanctioned, how much money was sanctioned for it, current status, and how much has been spent on it so far); labor-related (digitized muster rolls that list by name all individuals who worked on the site, the days and number of days they worked, what type of work they did- skilled, semi skilled, unskilled, how much work they did and what they have to be paid) and material-related (what kinds and volumes of supplies have been purchased, bills and vouchers of materials purchased). The MIS also generates reports. Reports consolidate the total costs for a work, including both labor and material costs. Another report is able to consolidate all that is linked to a worker: job card details, number of days of work obtained, names of the sites where the individual has worked.

All of this data is initially entered into record books or forms by the 'mate' and the NREGS assistant at the panchayat office. It is then entered into the MIS at the block-level by the people at the computer division of the

NREGS office. Meanwhile, payments are made to suppliers and to the bank/post office accounts of workers once the written records are verified by higher officials. The data entry in the MIS and payments are thus delinked.

How is the MIS accessed by members of a village community? Accessing the website assumes the availability of an infrastructure to do so among citizens. This is mostly not a reasonable assumption in rural Rajasthan. The ownership of computers by individuals is almost non-existent in this region. Panchayat offices do not yet have computers, though the Rajasthan government is planning to provide computers to panchayat offices in the near future. The nearest access points to a computer or the internet are thus more likely to be DTP shops or internet cafes in the nearest town. The block-level panchayat office and the NREGS-cell at the block-level panchayat also have computers and an internet connection. Making use of the MIS website also assumes literacy (of the written word in Hindi and of using computers). This is an even more problematic assumption and is only true of specific categories within communities. These groups tend to be largely determined by age, caste, class and gender.

In my study, my focus was not on direct access of the MIS by citizens access: access was instead mediated by the MKSS. What is important is that significant hurdles exist even where access is mediated by an entity that satisfies the assumptions of access to infrastructure and literacy better than the village population at large. (Intermittent) Access to a computer and the internet as well as computer literacy is a reasonable proposition for a few members of the MKSS today. MKSS members have also been known to obtain these records from the NREGS-cell at the block level panchayat office where that provides the closest access to computational infrastructure. In Vijayapura, the Panchayat Knowledge Centre is also an

option. MKSS members also draw on help, sometimes remotely, from urban researchers and interns who are associated with them and who are likely to have access to these resources.

However, accessing the website and making sense of it at the level of technology is only the first step in accessing the MIS or making use of it more generally. Drawing on their past experience, MKSS members have analysed the MIS to understand the parts that are most valuable to them. So far, they have zeroed in on the following: the 'funds flow' statement (which provides a break-up of the labor and material costs incurred under NREGS in a panchayat); the list and details of the muster rolls that constitute these labor costs; the bills and vouchers for materials that constitute the material costs; and reports that aggregate costs by a worksite and by household. In addition to the records required for a public hearing or a social audit, individual members are also sometimes interested in obtaining the records related to works in their own panchayat. Once the records have been identified, they are printed out and these records are taken around for sharing and verification as they have been in the past. An important difference is that members do not have to spend as much time aggregating the records manually, since at least some of the aggregations are available in the form of reports from the website. The MKSS has been talking about the benefits of the MIS and has also provided preliminary training on the MIS as part of the social audit training workshop that it conducted in association with the state and local governments in 2009 in different districts of Rajasthan.

The more significant problem associated with making use of MIS records once they have been accessed, is the quality of the data populating the MIS. As mentioned earlier, data entry and payment channels for the NREGS are not connected and happen independent of each other. This leaves the

quality of the data entered, as well its timeliness, severely compromised. The records on the MIS are often months behind what's happening on the ground. There are also inaccuracies. Since payments are not made based on the MIS, there is little incentive to keep the MIS updated. In addition, since one or two data entry operators enter the data for a block consisting of about 30 panchayats, where each panchayat has several work sites on which work is being carried out, the pile of records to be entered rapidly accumulates. Thus, the capacity of the administration to process records is limited. It is also possible that as awareness of the MIS increases—both of its existence and the idea that it is visible not just within the bureaucracy or to local elected functionaries, but to anyone who can access it—there will be resistance to entering records on time or accurately (where accuracy refers to the correspondence between handwritten records and the digital equivalents). MKSS's past experiences indicate that functionaries of the state at the gram panchayat and block levels, including bureaucrats and elected representatives, are often implicated in the creation or maintenance of false records. If previous jan sunwais or the minimum wage campaigns are any indication, a section of the bureaucracy is likely to possess little incentive to encourage (or even allow) the entry of accurate, timely data that can be examined by higher-level bureaucrats, citizens or civil society groups. This is especially true in the absence of any association between the MIS records and payments.

To resolve the problem of low quality (inaccurate, incomplete) information, the MKSS (among others) is trying to bring about policy changes that can make the MIS more useful. The primary suggestion is that payments be tied to the MIS. The disadvantage is that given the current speed of entry, payments to workers might get further delayed. But the proposed advantage is that once payments are made based on the MIS, the need for accuracy

and timeliness will increase, increasing the chances of better quality data on the MIS.¹³

Availability, accessibility and utility in MKSS's current work

MKSS's current work jan sunwais, records on the wall and the MIS, much like the earlier RTI campaign, suggests that the use of multiple media (audio, visual, audio-visual, digital, paper) is important in making information accessible. Thus, the MKSS uses songs, theatre, puppets, paper records, records on the wall and digital records in its work. Multiple modes of communication (passive as well as attention-seeking) are equally important in achieving better accessibility. Thus, while records are painted on the wall, they are also taken door to door during the preparation for a public hearing and are also read out in public places in the village.

Moreover, even making information accessible is but a step towards making it useful for different sections of a community. The MKSS calls itself a political movement, making explicit the importance of politics in its work and it is indeed political action that has made information useful to the communities that the MKSS works with. The follow-up action on jan sunwais as well as the MIS example suggest that political action, including both campaigning within communities and lobbying with bureaucrats and elected representatives, is required to make information useful to citizens.

Finally, administrative capacity is an important factor that shapes whether the political action and policy change can actually work on the ground. The delayed, incomplete or inaccurate information on the NREGA MIS indicates, among other things, the lack of administrative resources and capacity to process the required number of records.

¹³ In Andhra Pradesh, where such a model was adopted a while back, observers suggest that the NREGA MIS is timely and reflects paper records better.

This account does not mean to suggest that the MKSS has been completely successful in its current work or that it faces no challenges. The MKSS's work so far has leaned towards making the government supply more information, on different media, and in understandable formats. The demand from citizens in this region has largely been through MKSS activities: it is the MKSS that has spearheaded jan sunwais and used the MIS for such events. While there have been attempts on getting people to make the first move, and increasing instances of people demanding information, or particular kinds of records, media or formats, on their own, these are fewer in comparison. This indicates perhaps that the utility of these kinds of government information relative to the costs involved in making it useful continues to be low for a large number of citizens.

The question of demand also brings us to the question of decentralisation. MKSS's work started before the 73rd amendment became operational. Thus, in the initial years, the MKSS's work was done in the context of a traditional panchayat rather than an elected one. While the MKSS has always perceived itself as working with 'the grassroots', its use of the term is warranted more in the nature of its relationship with community members.¹⁴ Its relationship with the local elected panchayat institutions is much more complex. Because the MKSS's activities routinely bring it in opposition to functionaries (elected and non-elected) of the local panchayat, its follow-up steps often involve the higher-level of government (again both elected leaders and bureaucrats) at the district, state or even the national level. In the RTI campaign, for example, lobbying was often at the state or central level. For these reasons, while the MKSS is seen to be a proponent of decentralisation, a criticism could be that it often bypasses the participation

¹⁴ Members have referred to the RTI and NREGA as "people's laws" in their creation and have expressed a hope that they will be "people's laws" in implementation as well

of local panchayat functionaries entirely in its day-to-day work and processes of decision-making. That said, the bypassing should be seen as a logistical challenge as much as an ideological one. Especially after the RTI and NREGA campaigns led to the RTI and NREG Acts, the MKSS has been much sought-after by both the government and civil society organisations to conduct training programmes and to offer policy suggestions. These activities leave the MKSS members with little time to be 'based' in one place in the way that they initially were. This shapes their relations with panchayats as well as the scale or level at which they aim their policy suggestions. Instead, MKSS's close work with a panchayat is now focused on creating a 'model' panchayat in Vijayapura whose sarpanch in the period 2005-2010 was an MKSS worker.

I suggested earlier that information is socially embedded and that the MKSS's work with government information started only after the recognition that government records were intimately tied to the livelihoods of the community it worked with. However, making available government information accessible and useful is equally a process of re-embedding government records in a specific community's everyday economic, socio-cultural and political context. The government maintains records in a form (including terminology, units of measurement, locations and formats in which records are maintained) conducive to achieving its administrative and political objectives. This form is, however, so alien to people's everyday lives that it might need to be substantially modified before the connection between the two becomes apparent. This is the work of re-embedding that the MKSS seeks to do in order to make information more accessible and useful to the communities it works with. Further, we have seen that in this work of re-embedding information, the MKSS's work is shaped largely by its own ideas on what state-citizen relations should look like, including an

interpretation of decentralisation that engages or bypasses local representatives in different circumstances.

The Swaminathan Foundation's Information Village Research Project (IVRP)

The Swaminathan Foundation's project on information provision illustrates a completely different vision of how information can shape state-citizen relations. The Swaminathan Foundation's ideology, especially its explicit stance to stay away from politics, has shaped the Information Village Research Project (IVRP) as well as the utility of government information in the lives of the members of the communities where the IVRP is operational.

The Swaminathan Foundation is a research-based NGO that works mainly on agriculture-related research in India. It is completely unlike the MKSS in structure and operation but, much like MKSS, has kept the welfare state at the centre of all its attempts to bring about changes in state-citizen relations. The Swaminathan Foundation, however, does not propound a rights-based discourse, or challenge the working of the state.. The Swaminathan Foundation explicitly projects itself as apolitical and works within the framework of the state and its policies in their current form. In the IVRP, it has used ICTs as tools to take available government information to village communities, hoping to effect a transformation in the nature of state-citizen interactions in the region

The Swaminathan Foundation expresses support for decentralisation, but uses the term largely to refer to the involvement of the village community in its project to establish 'Knowledge Centres' in every Indian village. The chairperson of the foundation, M.S. Swaminathan, for example, has suggested at several forums that panchayats be enabled as "flagships for the knowledge revolution." The Foundation's information initiative is operated

on a community-based model, where 'community-based' refers to the idea that the village community, including panchayat members, will participate in the needs assessment and ongoing operations of the project. 'Decentralisation' in the IVRP has thus far not involved an active engagement with the local elected panchayats or their processes of decision-making in broader matters concerning the village community. It is worth noting here that the IVRP is based in Puducherry where the first panchayat elections were held in 2007, 14 years after the 73rd amendment was passed. The Swaminathan Foundation's work with the IVRP, therefore, involved interactions with traditional, non-elected panchayats than with constitutional, elected ones for a number of years.

The IVRP was started in 1998 with funding from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The objective of the project was to make available livelihood-related 'locale-specific information' from diverse sources, including the government, to village communities using a variety of traditional and non-traditional means of communication. Puducherry was chosen as the site for the IVRP since the union territory had a responsive government and had a comparatively good communication infrastructure. Further, the Swaminathan Foundation was familiar with the region since its Bio-village project too was based in Puducherry. At the time the IVRP was started in 1998, Puducherry had not had panchayat elections and traditional village councils were still the foremost decision-making authority in villages.

The IVRP operated on a hub-and-spokes model. The idea was to build a centrally located 'hub' that would act as an 'information clearing-house' and would be connected to 'information shops' located in villages. The hub is now known as a Village Resource Centre (VRC), while the 'information shops' have been renamed 'Village Knowledge Centres' (VKCs). The

project followed a hub and spokes structure technologically as well with the VRC connected to the internet and individual VKCs connected to the VRC rather than directly to the internet. In 11 years, since its inception, the IVRP had grown to 14 village level VKCs in Puducherry and, overall, to 100 such centres in India in 2009. The Puducherry project, however remains the oldest and most experienced arm of the IVRP.

In the first three weeks of my fieldwork in Puducherry, I spent time at the VRC talking to the personnel and understanding the history, structure and working of the project. I then visited all the operational VKCs, spending a day or two at each, observing how the VKC is used and interviewing the KWs on their daily routine. Of these, I selected two of the oldest VKCs—one based in an agricultural village that I call Sripet (which will be described in this report)¹⁵ and the other in a fishing village—for detailed study. I spent a month each in the two villages, talking to about 200 residents, including members of local community groups, VKC users, and those who had never been to the VKC. I also spoke to bureaucrats in the *taluk*, in the commune panchayat and in the Fisheries department in the city of Puducherry, all of whom interact with citizens in the two villages on a regular basis. Following a short description of the IVRP overall, I describe the working of the Sripet VKC with a focus on the government information it provides.

The VRC has historically been the centre for ‘value-addition’ i.e. information from a variety of sources including from the internet was customised in various ways at the VRC. For example, information available on the internet was translated into Tamil, the local language, at the VRC in order to make it accessible. The VRC also collected advice and suggestions on agriculture and animal husbandry from individuals, researchers and institutions and

¹⁵ The name of the village has been changed to grant it anonymity.

then sent these as regular bulletins called 'Farmer's Diary' to VKCs. The VRC also helped build and maintain linkages with Puducherry government departments and NGOs. It built a comprehensive database of government schemes when the project was initiated. This database was copied on the hard disk of the computers at the VKCs. The VRC also helped collate the community's inputs and publish a fortnightly community newspaper called '*Namma Ooru Saidhi*' ('News from our village'). Finally, the VRC conducted technical training programs (computer and business-related) as well as monthly meetings for VKC operators. The VRC personnel were also in daily touch with the VKCs and were instrumental in providing them technical support. Most of these functions continue to be performed by the VRC, though their interactions with the VKCs are now less frequent.

VKCs have been established in villages where some subgroup of the population of a village—the panchayat, a local milk cooperative, the temple trust—has asked for a VKC. When a letter was received from the community asking for a VKC, the Swaminathan Foundation examined the possibility of setting up a VKC in that village by conducting a village-level survey. Finally, where the survey supported the need for a VKC, and the community was willing to offer rent-free premises and two volunteers to operate the VKC, the Swaminathan Foundation and the panchayat signed a Memorandum of Understanding. VKCs consist of one or more computers and some basic furniture. A few of them are also equipped with a public announcement system attached to speakers placed in different parts of the village. VKCs also have blackboards where important news items are written up.

Since the IVRP was based on a community model and wanted the village community to take ownership of the VKCs, its initial focus was not on

financial sustainability. Rather, the project focused on making the VKCs socially viable and accessible to people from all castes and classes within a village. Most services offered by the VKCs were free of charge. The Swaminathan Foundation believed that financial sustainability would follow the social acceptance of the VKCs.¹⁶

The Swaminathan Foundation learnt through its experiences in the bio-village project as well as the earlier stages of the IVRP that the ease or possibility of 'access' to different buildings in the village was profoundly different for different people. 'Access' depended primarily on an individual's caste, class and gender. Since the organisation within a village was by caste, with the Scheduled Caste (SC) community residences being separated from the residences of other castes (typically the Backward Castes (BC) in this region) by anything between a few metres and several kilometres, VKCs in Puducherry today are typically housed in a single room located in a public building belonging to the panchayat, temple or local cooperative. Only rarely has a VKC been located in a private residence since residences are perceived to be less accessible for different caste groups within the village.

Issues of accessibility are not limited to physical infrastructure alone but are tied as much to questions of literacy as mentioned in the MKSS narrative. The person who mediates between the unfamiliar technology and the community for the VKCs is a 'knowledge worker.' VKCs are operated by two knowledge workers (KWs) who are supposed to stay at the VKC for eight hours every day (the hours differ from village to village). KWs are typically residents of the village in which they work. At its inception, the

¹⁶ However, a decade after the start of the IVRP, and with the funding from IDRC drying up, the VRC now has no option but to insist on financially sustainable VKCs.

IVRP had both male and female KWs in the belief that this would make VKCs accessible to both men and women. While there are no regulations against male KWs, all KWs today are female, a fact that is strongly tied to the salary structure at VKCs.¹⁷

KWs are pivotal to the working of VKCs. They constitute the link between the VRC and the village community. They are required to constantly assess the needs of the community and the opportunities for the VKC to make information accessible and useful to the community. They advertise and operationalise the services available at the VKC. In villages with public announcement systems, they announce important news, especially deadlines for government schemes and job vacancies, on the public announcement system. They write down the daily news on blackboards outside the VKC. KWs help distribute copies of *Namma Ooru Saidhi* in the village. In addition, they maintain hard and soft copies of a user register and announcement register, besides visitor notebooks and technical assistance registers. They are also supposed to conduct training sessions related to livelihood options in the village. Besides these activities, KWs have to assist with computer classes conducted by VRC personnel at their VKC. Finally, but critically, in the last few years, KWs have also been expected to bring in an income to make the VKC financially self-sustaining in the long run.

VKCs offer a variety of services. Talking to village residents indicates that the services that people most identify with the VKC are computer courses, CD-based Maths/science/English lessons for school students, time on the computer, awareness camps co-hosted by the Swaminathan Foundation,

¹⁷ For the first few years of the project, the KWs were volunteers, who received no salary or stipend. Since 2005, KWs receive a stipend of Rs. 800 per month, making theirs an extra income rather than the primary source within a household. This is also a reason why women, seldom considered primary breadwinners in this region, opt to be KWs rather than men who move on to jobs that pay more.

and announcements on the loudspeaker or blackboard. This last is the most related to government information and, therefore, of interest to us. In order to make these announcements, KWs collect news headlines from the VRC, from local institutions and from newspapers. They announce these and also write them on the blackboard. These items typically include news of interest to the village community - notifications regarding job vacancies, dates on which the government will distribute free clothes, dates when the local ration shop will be open for selling rice, sugar or kerosene at subsidised rates. Political news is excluded.

Sripet

Sripet is a small village of about 150 households in the Villianur commune and *taluk* of Puducherry. A few decades ago, village residents had to move to the present location following the flooding of a nearby river. The land on which the village stands now was donated to the village community in the years following its resettlement. These houses in the village are a mix of permanent and temporary structures as well as houses under construction. About 30 households inhabit a piece of land that a local politician (then -Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of the constituency) bought for the villager residents and subsequently allotted to them using a token system. This area called 'Pudhu Nagar' has no roads, no water connection or authorised electricity connections since none of the residents possess pattas (certificate of land ownership) for the land. Here, all the houses have thatched, temporary roofs.

Sripet is a *dalit* (SC) village flanked on both sides by BC villages of the panchayat. Its location and demography have shaped the plight of the village and its residents today. Traditionally, village residents who have little land of their own, worked on the land of higher caste land-owners in the adjacent

village. Even today, most villagers are agricultural laborers. However, as land is increasingly sold off as 'plots' to real estate agencies for construction, the requirement for laborers has been decreasing. Most in the older generation do not have the formal education or the socio-political connections required in order to obtain a job in the public or private sector. While formal education levels in the village have been traditionally low, the village now has a few college graduates who struggle to find jobs.

Village residents point out that the label of a dalit village has cost them a lot. None of the infrastructural facilities available in their gram panchayat are housed in Sripet. The library, community hall and middle school are in other villages of the gram panchayat. The panchayat office, commune office, *taluk* office, and higher secondary school are all in the city of Villianur, a few kilometres away. Infrequent and irregular public transport between the village and the nearest cities of Villianur or Puducherry worsens the situation. Even though many residents travel daily from Sripet to Villianur or Puducherry for reasons of education, work or health, the Puducherry Road Transport Corporation bus runs to Puducherry from the village only four times a day. People associated with the VKC suggest that given this situation, residents felt the lack of an accessible community asset that they could call their own. The VKC was Sripet's first and only community asset. When it was started, it offered a promise of computer classes at subsidised rates as well as job opportunities for the younger generation. Thus, in addition to being its only community asset, the VKC also represented the aspirations of the older generation in the village for the younger generation.

The VKC was brought to Sripet at the behest of a local youth group that was engaged in facilitating government-citizen interactions in the village. The Swaminathan Foundation already had a presence and enjoyed legitimacy in the village because of the bio-village self-help groups it had set up in the

village. It was through these self-help groups that members of the youth group heard of the IVRP. They decided to participate in the project. In a needs survey that followed their request for a VKC, the Swaminathan Foundation found that besides employment-related news, village residents also wanted from the VKC a list of government schemes and entitlements that they could avail themselves of.¹⁸ Following the needs survey, the youth club further pursued the matter with the traditional panchayat in the village and also with the commune panchayat. The commune panchayat agreed to have the VKC operate out of the community radio/television room without having to pay rent. Volunteers of the youth club and self-help groups agreed to operate the VKC without a salary and were provided basic computer training by the VRC. The Sripet VKC was inaugurated in December 2000. The building was operated as a VKC by day and as a TV centre by night. Gradually, as individual television sets became the norm, the need for a community TV faded and the building became a full time VKC. VKC volunteers collated important new items and notifications that they obtained from newspapers and from the VRC. These were typed up, printed out and pasted on the board in front of the VKC. The VKC, for its part, kept in touch with the VRC by sending in daily bulletins of VKC happenings.

In the initial years, VKC volunteers also focused on the databank of government schemes that had been compiled by the VRC. One of the volunteers at the VKC from the time says that the list helped them frame questions to ask junior bureaucrats. Now that they knew the schemes and

¹⁸ Interestingly, the residents of the adjoining BC village also wrote to the Swaminathan Foundation asking for a VKC in their village. the Swaminathan Foundation declined saying that one village in a panchayat could cater to all villages of the panchayat. A former VKC volunteer suggests that the community in the adjacent village resented this episode especially since it followed on the heels of Sripet's fame due to its SHG initiatives. He suggests that residents of the BC village do not frequent the VKC even today for this reason.

entitlements that were on offer, the VKC volunteers could target specific ones depending on the profile of the applicant and ask specific questions regarding the application process. Such questions had a higher chance of receiving a response from the bureaucrat compared to requests for a complete of schemes that a resident *might* be eligible for. Volunteers often accompanied applicants from office to office in order to submit their applications or ask for responses. In the process, the VKC volunteers became familiar with procedures, gained visibility in the government offices and developed connections within. To that extent, VKC volunteers smoothened government-citizen interactions and brought some relief to residents.

Over the next four years, however, this set of volunteers disbanded for a variety of reasons. Working full- time without a stipend became untenable for the core volunteers. In the meanwhile, the Swaminathan Foundation's credibility in the village had suffered many setbacks as the ventures of the Swaminathan Foundation SHGs failed one by one. Businesses started on SHG loans shut down amidst accusations that funds were being misused, and people had to use up their personal savings to repay loans. Many members of the SHGs felt that the Swaminathan Foundation personnel were at fault for the failure of the businesses. As a result, conflicts among village residents as well as between residents and the Swaminathan Foundation intensified. Conversations with residents, especially users and volunteers at the VKC, suggest that the SHG politics affected the working of the VKC and its credibility adversely.

By the end of 2004, the old VKC volunteers had all left. The new set of volunteers were drawn from those who had first entered the VKC as computer students. As volunteers changed, the extent of hand- holding provided to residents in their interactions with the government was limited

to verbal suggestions. As a result, the database on government schemes available on the local computer was rarely looked up. The database was also not updated frequently which may also explain its disuse. Thus, just the availability of a database did not ensure that it was accessed in the absence of an effective mediator.

In 2007, a volunteer managed to get a public announcement system installed. This quickly became the new face of the VKC. Announcements are made several times during the day and repeated three or four times in each phase. Announcements in the past have included

- a) details of applying for employment and education- related opportunities
- b) notification of schedules for rice, kerosene and sugar distribution at the public distribution system outlet in the village
- c) details of free clothes distribution for special occasions such as festivals by the Puducherry government
- d) notification of schedule for pension disbursements
- e) details of new government schemes like the NREGS

The effect of the public announcement system has been such that several village residents today recognise the VKC solely by that. While asking residents whether they knew of the VKC in their village or had used it any manner, those who stayed at home for at least some part of the day—mostly the elderly and a few women—responded that they either “did not know of a VKC in their village” or had “never used it.” It was only when the announcements were explicitly mentioned and their connection to the VKC described, that residents said they had indirectly used the VKC. Almost all residents said that the announcements were of some use to

them. While people said that they had earlier relied on village elders and word-of-mouth to know about many matters regarding the government, the announcements helped them know directly. On further probing, however, many admitted that it was not only the VKC that had helped change earlier patterns of getting to know about government schemes, procedures and notifications. Most people had a TV now and TVs too provided the same news items. The advantage offered by loudspeakers according to residents was that audio announcements caught one's attention. The use of multiple modes of communication, both passive and active, and not necessarily involving hi-tech communication technologies, made information more accessible to more people.

However, even making information accessible does not always make it useful. An articulate ex-member of the Swaminathan Foundation self-help group, an agricultural labourer by profession, presents the quandary faced by the VKC and village residents alike. "The VKC might provide us information," she says, "But of what use is this information to me?" She makes this statement in the context of three fundamental problems of Sripet that she has been describing to me—the delay in the implementation of the NREGS scheme, the lack of a pattas (certificates of land ownership) among residents, and the lack of '64 -evidence' for many belonging to the younger generation in the village.¹⁹

The most recent government scheme related announcement that had been made at the VKC was regarding the issue of NREGA job cards for those over 18 years of age. However, since the VKC has no further links with the panchayat, the KWs are unable to answer further questions regarding

¹⁹ The -64 evidence is a requirement from the Puducherry government by which anyone who requires a caste certificate needs to prove that they or their ancestors were residents of Puducherry in 1964.

the implementation of NREGS. People want to know what to do with their job cards, since no work has been started in the panchayat under the scheme, although adjacent gram panchayats had active work sites. The KWs have no answers and only repeat what the panchayat and ward members have told them: that work will start soon and that the funds have not yet been received by the panchayat. This explanation has not changed in the past few months, nor had work started in Sripet as late as November 2009.

Given the need for employment for unskilled labour in Sripet, the significance of the NREGS in this village cannot be overemphasized. However, residents do not know the procedure involved in demanding work. They do not know who to demand it of. They do realise that questions regarding NREGS ultimately have to be asked of the panchayat and ward members. The few of them who have tried doing that say that they have heard the same response from these elected representatives time and again: that NREGS work will eventually come to the village. Residents are unsure how to proceed further. Talking to the NREGS cell in the BDO office indicates that it will only proceed to approve works and allocate funds for works when the panchayat leader approaches them with a request: this has not yet happened in the case of Sripet. The fact that people want work cannot be directly addressed by the BDO office since NREGS is fundamentally a scheme routed through the panchayat and therefore relies critically on panchayat members. Thus, although people understood the procedures of NREGS through the VKC, they were not able to do much with the job cards they managed to get themselves.

The second problem faced by a large number of residents is that they don't have pattas. As mentioned earlier, the village of Sripet was built on land donated by an individual. Village residents were at that time issued temporary pattas in the names of the people who inhabited the land then.

Many of these people have since died. Name changes cannot be made on a temporary patta and, therefore, many families now have temporary pattas in the names of ancestors, who are no longer alive. Because of the complicated history of land occupation in Sripet, a majority of the residents do not have permanent pattas to the land they are on. While Puducherry has many schemes for house loans, all of them require permanent pattas or at least temporary pattas that carry the same name as the loan application. Thus, even where residents have information regarding government schemes from the VKC, they have no way of using it. Residents have tried approaching the local MLA as well as bureaucrats to sort out this problem. But the internal conflicts among village residents, the lack of enthusiasm for sustained collective action and the power play of elected representatives have all contributed to the problem staying exactly where it was years ago. Similarly complicated is the issue of 64-evidence. Older village residents suggest that few among their parents would have known of birth registration or any other form of registration. Lack of such evidence has meant that several students have not been able to proceed beyond class ten in Sripet for this reason since they can't make use of SC welfare schemes or reservation without the 64-evidence.

A majority of the village residents that I spoke to echoed the sentiment that lack of employment opportunities, the lack of pattas and 64-evidence were the primary problems faced by village residents. They also contended that collective action and political pressure were the only ways to sort these issues out and devise alternatives. Information, they said, can do nothing without politics. This statement by citizens is especially interesting when juxtaposed with the Swaminathan Foundation policy of being apolitical in its work. The Sripet KWs, for example, are clear that they will not announce or display anything related to '*arasiyal*' ('politics') following the stance of

the VRC. By politics, they mean specifically the activities of political parties. During the Lok Sabha elections in May 2009, for example, they did not announce party manifestos. All that they announced connected to the elections was the procedure for voting on an electronic voting machine. The only items announced through the VKC that might be related to political parties, the KWs continue, are the new schemes or entitlements offered by the ruling party or coalition. Even beyond the announcements, KWs and the Swaminathan Foundation do not include any kind of political action in their plans for the VKC's future. Other than the contradiction in the utility of politics as perceived by community members and by the Swaminathan Foundation, it is also ironical that while the Swaminathan Foundation states a desire to distance itself from politics, the working of a VKC is intimately tied to politics within the village, whether or not the project intended for that to be so.²⁰

Information Village Research Project: Availability, accessibility and utility of information

The working of the VKC in Sripet reinforces some of the points made earlier using the MKSS case. That available information is not necessarily accessible to a community. Gender, class and caste form a barrier to access, as do language and literacy. In the case of VKCs, translation of English content into Tamil, the customisation of weather news by the VRC, thinking through the location of VKCs, and the mediation by the KWs are all acts

²⁰ Loans for government schemes require verification of an applicant's credentials as presented in his/her application- typically, income levels, place of residence etc. Typically, this is done through field visits involving physical verification where possible and also conversations with village residents in order to verify the details on the application forms. Bureaucrats from banks or the government assigned to a specific village typically develop networks within the village that they trust in this process. The KWs are being seen as trustworthy sources by some since they are supposed to know all details of village residents. What is even more interesting is the fact that KWs say they sometimes confirm details especially income details that they might know to be false. Their justification for doing this is that everyone in their village is poor and government money is after all supposed to go to the poor.

of making information accessible. Using different media such as the loudspeaker and the blackboard also helped make information more accessible to more citizens. But finally, when it comes to making information useful, it is impossible to ignore the embedded nature of information, in particular its embedding in politics.

In the VKC in Sripet, the KWs did not have social or political connections within or beyond the panchayat that they could leverage in order to obtain a satisfactory answer to their queries or solutions to these problems. Further, the VKCs had not helped village residents forge these new connections with the panchayat or local politicians. Therefore, only those among the residents who already had these connections could get by. As a respected research organization that routinely interacts with the state to provide policy inputs, the Swaminathan Foundation does not lack connections. However, its personnel persistently distance themselves from politics as a matter of internal policy. The village residents, on the other hand, asked me only one question: of what use is information without politics? The patta problem, and the concerns around 64-evidence are integral to the everyday lives of residents and their relationship with the state. But they are unlikely to be sorted out without political action—with or without the support of the IVRP and the Swaminathan Foundation.

AVAILABILITY, ACCESSIBILITY AND UTILITY OF GOVERNMENT INFORMATION

I started this report suggesting that a socially embedded understanding of information has two implications for government information systems: one, that the need for specific kinds of government information will draw on the specifics of state-citizen interactions in a region and second, that once government information is available, it will need to be re-embedded in a specific community for it to be accessible or useful. MKSS's and Swaminathan Foundation's work with government information support both these ideas. In addition, both cases suggest that political action is likely to be an important component of making information useful. Conversely, a distancing from politics reduces the utility of government information. Further, the nature of the relationship between the mediating group that I studied and different tiers of the state was an especially important factor that shaped the nature of political action in each instance. Finally, although political action is critical, administrative capacity is also essential to make policy changes work on the ground.

I have discussed 'political action' in the context of government information so far in the sense of applying pressure on the local government (or higher tiers of the government) to part with information and make it available. However, we also need to ask what motivates the citizen to ask for this information in the first place. An implication of the socially embedded view of information is that a citizen who finds government records difficult to decipher and whose past experience indicates that s/he has no say in the decision-making process might not see much use for particular kinds of information. These factors will determine how motivated a citizen is to ask for or use information. Similarly, members of the local government whose experience suggests that parting with information will cause them more

trouble than withholding it, are unlikely to be motivated to make efforts to make information available, accessible, or useful. The motivation to demand information is thus an important concern and is particularly pertinent when we think of budget information.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BUDGET INFORMATION AND THE BIS/BIP

Recognition that information is socially embedded leads us to two conclusions that are equally applicable to the BIS/ BIP project. First, rather than information being innately or universally useful, specific kinds of government information are valued in particular contexts. This means that the demand or lack of demand for particular kinds of government information needs to be analysed, not assumed for any community: budget information cannot therefore be assumed to be useful to a community. Rather, the question is how this information can be useful in the context of a specific community. The second pertinent conclusion is that government information is often presented in forms that need to be re-embedded in a specific context before they are accessible or useful to a community. This is especially applicable to budget information which is maintained in a form that is quite alien to most of the communities that the BIS/BIP project hopes to attract. The first conclusion is something that CBPS will need to determine through its existing work in specific communities. I discuss in more detail the second: how budget information may be re-embedded in a community to make it more accessible and useful based on the insights I outlined in the previous section from the MKSS and Swaminathan Foundation examples.

Accessing the BIP will require at the very least, direct or indirect access to the internet since the content on the BIP will initially be accessible only through a website. CBPS will therefore need to understand how this aspect

of access will be resolved (differently) for different members of a community. But even beyond the physical infrastructure, language, device and budget literacy will shape the accessibility of the BIP.

- Language literacy

The BIP is currently available only in English and availability of budget information in the local language will constitute a step in making it accessible to more people.

- Device literacy

At the current stage of development, accessing the BIP directly will require some computer and internet literacy. My research suggests that the use of multiple media will widen the population that finds this information more accessible because different media might be accessible and familiar to different sections of the population. CBPS hopes to gradually expand to other modes of content delivery.

Further, budget information is currently available predominantly as text on the BIP. Expanding the ways in which the information is presented to include data visualisation and an audio component might make parts of the information system accessible to more sections of the community.

In terms of technology, adopting an open rather than a proprietary format would keep the information system accessible to people using a range of software platforms.

- Budget literacy

Customisable reports could play an important part in re-embedding information by making possible the aggregation of budget information at different levels of granularity and by categories that make the most sense for a community.

While budget literacy is important to make budget information on the BIP accessible, it does not have to be promoted solely through features on the portal. Budget workshops are a mechanism that is used to discuss the importance of budgets and their relationship to people's lives. CBPS has already been conducting budget workshops with elected representatives in order to illustrate the importance of analysing budgets and how budget analyses can help them in the process of prioritising, planning and decision-making. Rather than 'dry' numbers, the workshops present critically packaged information that evokes interest. For example, when it is pointed out that street lights maintenance per kilometre differed by a factor of 1:5 in neighbouring villages, the representatives were interested in knowing more...

CBPS has also shared aggregated and processed budget information with local bureaucrats who do not otherwise have access to budget information in the aggregate form or as time-series data.

Besides workshops, CBPS has also used publications and films to talk about budgets. It has presented region and sector-specific budget information and its recommendations for creating participatory and effective budget processes to government bodies (CBPS 2007a; CBPS 2007b). Its films such as *Aaya Vyaya*,²¹ *The Story of a Municipality* and *A Question of Equity* that concern budget information and the budget process have been screened at training sessions and in its workshops. With these films, CBPS hopes to open up its analyses of budget information and the budget process to broader debate. As CBPS moves forward with the budget information services project, it will need to continue using these mechanisms to supplement the availability of budget information through the BIP. Further,

²¹ *Aaya Vyaya* is Kannada for Income and Expenditure.

it can also leverage some of these means, especially the workshops, to specifically discuss the working of the BIS and BIP.

Questions of utility are always the most complex to unravel. I have suggested that because of the socially embedded nature of information, its value for a community will draw from the specific context in which the community operates, particularly its incentives for demanding information and its politics. Budget workshops and a focus on budget literacy might be one way of creating more demand for budget information. CBPS's practice of taking budget analysis beyond the government for a broader debate in the form of documentaries also acts as a step in making budgets a part of everyday conversation. An individual or group's past experiences on the trade-offs and benefits of making use of such information are also likely to be important in understanding people's motivation to demand budget information. Connectedly, the follow-up action associated with an analysis of budget information is also likely to influence demand for budget information and the BIP. The quality and format of budget information on the BIS are also important factors that will determine its utility.

In terms of politics, questions of how decentralisation operates in a region are key. The BIP is being inserted in an existing web of relations within and between the local government, the different tiers of the PRI and citizens. CBPS hopes that different groups that are interested in studying budgets - researchers, academics, local governments, citizens and others - will use the BIP. Each of these groups is likely to have different uses for the budget information and may also have conflicting interests on questions of budget allocation, which will constitute an important aspect of the political context of the community. For example, if the BIP or other mechanisms lead to an increase in demand for budget information by citizens, it could, at least theoretically, lead to a shift in the prevalent accountability mechanism where

government officials are only accountable to their higher-ups in the government. This possibility might lead to resistance to the BIP from government officials. Thus, if the BIP does make budget information accessible to a larger section of the population and acts as a ground for increasing interactions between different groups of potential users, CBPS will need to decide what its role is going to be in these interactions between the different entities and their conflicting interests. Further, it will need to determine how it wishes to interact with the different tiers of the PRI in its work. What will be its own role and that of other civil society groups and elected representatives in the process of analysing budgets with the BIP? Once the BIP is operational, these might well be the questions that decide whether communities demand budget information and how useful they find or make the BIP.

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APPENDIX 1

Decentralisation and information

The World Bank in 2000 suggested that decentralisation has three components: political, administrative and fiscal.

Political decentralization transfers policy and legislative powers from central government to autonomous, lower-level assemblies and local councils that have been democratically elected by their constituencies. Administrative decentralization places planning and implementation responsibility in the hands of locally situated civil servants, who are under the jurisdiction of elected local governments. Fiscal decentralization accords substantial revenue and expenditure authority to intermediate and local governments.

- Cited in Johnson 2003: 4

Besides the fundamental goal of democratising local decision-making processes, the list of benefits associated with decentralisation includes the following points:

- a) Local governments can better serve the needs and identify the preferences of their constituents than can be done at a national level (Gadwani 2005). For reasons of political accountability, local rather than national politicians are likely to have a greater incentive to make use of information regarding local needs and preferences in their work. (World Bank 2000 cited in Gadwani 2005)
- b) The implementation of schemes and programs that were earlier referred to remote state or central bureaucrats would now be implemented through the local administrative structure, potentially reducing inefficiencies, delays and inappropriate/irrelevant items for action (Vyasulu 2000).

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- c) Physical proximity makes it easier for citizens to monitor the working of the local government and hold local officials accountable for their performance (World Bank 2000).

Whether 'information' refers to details of government procedures and schemes, records of needs assessment, details of the planning process, the government's budget and expenditure, or government documents issued to individual citizens, its availability is perceived to either be a part of the goals of decentralisation outlined above or to potentially contribute to the achievement of these goals. On the one hand, public availability of local government information could potentially democratise state-citizen relations and make their interactions productive. On the other hand, the promised devolution of resources, administrative authority, and political power to the local government following decentralisation made the very availability of local information to both citizens and the local government seem more feasible. Revisiting the benefits outlined above, for example, information finds some connection with each point on the list:

- a) Local processes of decision-making regarding the allocation of government funding or the working of government programmes could be better thought through if citizens and elected representatives had information regarding schemes, procedures, budgets and costs in that region.
- b) With decentralisation, as citizens interact more with local-level bureaucrats than with federal and remotely located bureaucrats, interactions could be made more efficient with the easy availability of information such as government-issued citizen records.
- c) Finally, the availability of information on the funds received by the local government, as well as the details of its expenditure, would make monitoring possible.

About the Author

Janaki is a Ph.D. candidate at the UC Berkeley, School of Information. Her dissertation research focuses on different conceptions of information and how these have played out in the context of providing government information in rural India. Her fieldwork for her dissertation has focussed on the history of the RTI campaign and on the working of information provision using ICT-based information kiosks. Her previous research has been on eGovernance projects in Tamilnadu and she was part of a Government of India research project studying the costs and benefits of such projects.



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